The unravelling of The United Methodist Church has reached one more turning in the road. The Feinberg Protocols are the bridge into the future that is now taken with radical seriousness on all sides. There is little to add to the responses already available on social and other media. The level and high quality of engagement makes clear that the debate about the future is now joined in earnest. We can expect all sorts of surprises as we move into the next phase of reception. There is a time and place for unravelling the amazing political dimensions involved, dimensions that are concealed in the pious and positive language that shows up in the Protocols and the commentary on them. I leave that for another day; my moral assessment of what has happened is not pretty. My interest here is to come clean on my sense of where we are and where we should go.

Looked at over the short span of recent history, what we have is the end of the experiment that was worked out after the uniting of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren. The church was saddled from the beginning with three forms of internal incoherence. First, the effort to have a pluralist church, a church which housed a wide variety of doctrinal and moral options, was incoherent because it excluded from the very beginning any robustly conservative or orthodox version of Methodism. While claiming to be inclusive it was built on an exclusive ecclesiology that as a matter of simple logic excluded a more substantial vision of what a church should be. Pluralism as applied to a church is in fact a highly partisan way to think of what a church should be. Churches, like any.
organization, cannot exist without boundaries; pluralism excluded traditional boundaries even as it depended on its own meta-boundary that rejected the rejection of pluralism. This is not a matter of semantics or logic-chopping; it is a matter of social and political reality. In the end, the whole thing was bound to unravel; it was destined to collapse from within.

Second, there was a very particular incoherence at the very heart of United Methodism. On the one hand, it endorsed pluralism in the arena of doctrine (including the option of the death of God theology); on the other hand, it developed a very specific orthodox commitment in the arena of sexual morality, marriage, and ordination standards. Few, if any, saw that this is utterly incoherent. Doctrine is just a fancy word for church teaching. The general vision of church teaching (allow as many options as can be grounded in the quadrilateral) was clearly at odds with the very specific teaching carried forward by that same General Conference with respect to sexuality. Albert Outler fought with all the skill he could muster for both these commitments; late in life he stepped back from the first (doctrinal pluralism) but held resolutely to the second (conservative views on sexuality). Again, no organization can live for long with this kind of incoherence lodged in its bosom.

Third, the implementation of pluralism and the effort to impose the quadrilateral on the whole church was also incoherent. On one hand, we said that we can allow diversity on theory of knowledge in theology; on the other hand, we committed United Methodism to a very particular theory of knowledge. Putting the issue uncharitably, the quadrilateral is akin to flat earth theory when it comes to debates about how we know what we know. Unfortunately, it is useless in actually resolving issues in that those who use it can manipulate the outcome to get whatever results they desire. It simply adds to confusion in debates about sexuality. Perhaps, we are already overdosed on incoherence, so this last observation does not matter; however, informed observers naturally feel the dissonance at issue. In so far as they do, we have yet another cause which has brought us to the brink of dissolution.

I see no way forward other than to opt for a happy death and a hopeful future.

In speaking of a happy death, I do not mean us to take the happiness involved as psychological. I mean it in a more ontological and providential sense. Early Methodists had a strong tradition of a happy death. By this they did not mean that one could avoid the usual phenomena of grief, denial, anger, anxiety, and the like. Nor did it mean that there was no work to be done on the property and assets of those who died. They meant that one should handle death with assurance and even gratitude. We have all seen situations where we have thought (if not said) that death was a blessing in disguise. This is how I see things at present. Or, to turn to another more singular observation from early Methodism: when Wesley’s marriage failed and his wife left him, he noted that the water had been spilt and could not be gathered up again. We have all heard the hackneyed references to divorce and the conventional aftermath; these embody some truth, or we would not repeat them. It is time to face reality and look upon the death of United Methodism as a happy death.

Technically, of course, this is inaccurate. Technically, it looks as if The United Methodist Church will continue as a legal entity complete with name and restricted assets. However, the post-separation United Methodist Church will not be the church that we have known across the years. Preachers who tell this to their local congregations in order to calm troubled waters (I could name names) are being fooled if they believe this. Put simply, you cannot lose a significant network of conservative pastors and members and not be radically altered. When Methodism left or was pushed out of The Church of England, the losses theologically and evangelistically were serious. However, Methodism would never have developed the rich heritage that it did if it had remained inside the Anglican womb. When Pentecostalism left or was pushed out of Methodism at the turn of the twentieth century, the loss to Methodism was incalculable. One historian once remarked to me that the only good thing Methodism ever did was to give birth to Pentecostalism. Perhaps the most important gift of United Methodism to the world may be the birth of a fresh and invigorated version of Methodism. This is exactly what we should now pray and work for with gusto.
It will take time for most ordinary United Methodists to come to terms with the notion of a happy death. This is where my analogy begins to break down. For one thing, the effort to mask this reality by pious phrases will encourage many to provide a less painful description of the situation. Furthermore, the full impact of what is happening will take time to emerge. That is one reason why centrist pastors in particular will talk a good game, even though they fear that as the change begins to sink in, many who initially stick with the status quo will realize that they can no longer belong to the post-separation United Methodist Church in North America. For example, many pastors are saying something like: “Others will do same sex weddings, but we won’t do that here; or, as senior pastor I will not do it, but I will allow our associates to do it off campus.” At every Charge Conference, though, there will be those within the congregation pushing for the change, and so every year the leaders will have to vote again on their policy, and once again answer the question why any limits at all should be put on marriage, since the UMC in North America will have defined it solely in terms of the person-relative commitments (or feelings) of the participants. Conservatives who move earlier will need to be sensitive and magnanimous to those who are less sure what to do than they are. However, we have waited long enough in the wilderness. So, let’s saddle up the camels and head over into the promised land. A future full of hope is ahead of us.

I have my own general aspirations that I will carry with me over into the new, renewed Methodist denomination. I envisage the creation of a Methodism that will be orthodox in doctrine, effective in bringing folk to a living faith in Jesus Christ, biblically literate, inspired and equipped by the good and life-giving Holy Spirit, caring for the poor, vigorous in teaching an industrial-strength version of Christianity, politically and socially engaged in the public arena, driven by lay ministry set free to experiment, open to the length and breadth of orthodoxy, intellectually rigorous and vibrant, and truly global in scale. No single description will work; we need a thick description of what we want to see God bring about in our midst. We also need to seize the freedom that will be ours once we get away from the politically correct straight-jacket that is tacitly in play. We will be done with Annual Conferences that have featured a church within the church decked out in its own sartorial costume! We will be at liberty to praise God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with gusto as one people once again!

Permit at this point a more person-relative wish list. I would love to see us build a strong connection with world-wide Methodism. There are tens of millions of children of the Wesleyan movement across the earth who are not part of the UMC, and are put off by its present politics and policies. They stand with us in our understanding of the historic importance of the core ordinances of the church. The new, renewed Methodist church will have the opportunity to move beyond lip service to a true unity of mission with the rest of the world. In fact, in time I would love to see a host of non-UMC Methodist/Wesleyan churches who share an authentic version of our tradition either affiliate with or become part of the new Methodist denomination that is on the horizon. There is no need to identify names at this point. Moreover, this development will require special patience, wisdom, and cross-cultural intelligence. However, just think of the diverse gifts that will be available across the mind and life of the church up ahead.

I would love to see an upgrade in our practices related to the Lord’s Supper. Why not have a full meal in our homes where we include the celebration of the Eucharist? Think of what this might do if we began in the homes of our shut-ins or those in nursing homes. Combined at the congregational level with real biblical exegesis and preaching, this could work wonders in our worship. Talk about a converting ordinance! Think of a sense of the glory of God descending in our midst! I got glimpses of this after my conversion in Ireland, and I would dearly love to have fresh glimpses today.

I would love to see all the leaders of the new, renewed church immerse themselves in the great canonical sermons of Wesley read as a brilliant if incomplete handbook of spiritual direction. We have a batch of sermons on how to become a Christian; a batch on what it is to be a Christian; and a batch on how to survive the trials and tribulations of the Christian life. This would give us a common discourse
from which to begin our extended conversation together. No more silly reductionistic slogans! No more handwaving in the direction of this or that abstraction in our heritage! No more Wesleyan fizzy lemonade! Real food for the soul that will drive us towards holiness! And what about a fresh start on the relation between faith and politics that begins with Wesley’s devotion to the legacy of Edmund Burke!

I would love to see us recover some of the rich hymnody of Methodism. How about the whole congregation singing the great hymns of Charles Wesley in four-part harmony? How about organizing on a quarterly basis hymn-fests where we revel in the joy of the music and the grandeur of the theology? There is no need to abandon either the great tradition of Gospel songs or the developing heritage of contemporary music. I am at home in both these traditions. However, we need at times to nourish ourselves with the spiritual meat of our own glorious tradition. The Irish who first brought Methodism to North America can join in from the gallery.

Above all I want to see souls saved in our churches, really saved, so that they can become salt and light in the world surrounded and cheered on by the great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on from the balcony above. We are done with toy religion, with thin forms of piety, with absurd moral slogans, and with a theology so sick and feeble that it is not worth disbelieving! We have been in the wilderness long enough, constantly looking over our shoulders and half-expecting to be hit over the head by self-appointed gatekeepers. It is time to get ready for a new journey together under leadership who have secured the very best that they can in the circumstances. We can harvest the fruit of renewal and bake it into the Methodist meat and drink of the future. There is a time to expose the political shenanigans that are in play; as I mentioned earlier, this will not be a pretty sight. However, now is the time to stand up straight, salvage what we can for the kingdom, and march into the much better future that the good Lord has in store for us. Charles Wesley got it exactly right.

Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the childlike praying love,
That longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o’erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.
My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinner’s friend.
Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless energy divine:
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a love like thine:
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.

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